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Articles in Today's Clips

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

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Blacks give Kooiman an earful at welfare meeting

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

By Steven Harmon
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- State Rep. Jerry Kooiman used some touchy language and paid for it. In defending his welfare reform legislation before a skeptical crowd of black community leaders Monday, the Grand Rapids Republican spoke of the need to administer "tough love" as a way to break the cycle of poverty and welfare dependency.

A murmur rose from the crowd at the Sheldon Complex on the Southeast Side. And Randal Jelks, a Calvin College professor, who is black, gave Kooiman an earful.

"You can't tell me that as a white man," Jelks said. "It's insulting for you to come here and say that. We know more than you will ever know about what the cycle of welfare does to our folks. Don't you dare come into this audience in front of my people and say that again."

The outburst was a culmination of a frustrating meeting for many leaders, who said they felt excluded from talks that are near the end. The House and Senate are in negotiations over welfare reform they hoped to get approved today.

"Unfortunately, we came in at the tail end of a long process," said the Rev. Walter Brame, president of the Urban League of Grand Rapids and one of the meeting's organizers. "I'm hopeful the legislator is willing to listen to his constituency."

Kooiman said he has spoken to Work First agency employees, case workers and non-profit organizations. But that did not satisfy Ellen James, a vice president of the Grand Rapids NAACP.

"You talked to everybody but the people you should have included," she said.

The legislation would restrict cash assistance recipients to four years maximum on welfare and could cut off some recipients earlier under stiffer sanctions being proposed.

Under House legislation, recipients would lose their benefits permanently if they fail to comply with eligibility rules, such as keeping up with job training and job search efforts.

A Senate measure, being developed by state Sen. Bill Hardiman, R-Kentwood, would withdraw benefits for two years before reinstating them.

Currently, if people fail to comply, benefits are taken away for 30 days, then reinstated.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has pledged to veto the legislation if exceptions are not made to protect vulnerable populations.

Kooiman defended the sanctions, saying some welfare recipients need "incentives" to seek self-sufficiency.

"I don't see it as punitive," he said. "I see it as a pressure to keep people moving through the system. Sometimes you need to have something pushing you to take that step toward self-sufficiency."

He said the focus of the reform is to move away from merely placing people in jobs to helping them develop long-term skills. He promised an increase in funding for job training.

The welfare reform opens up educational opportunities, he said. Currently, recipients can attend a post-secondary school for up to 12 months and must work full-time. Under the new legislation, recipients could go for up to 24 months and would be required to work 20 hours a week.

EDITORIAL

Battle Creek Enquirer

Welfare reform should include job opportunities

Michigan legislators are working to revamp the state's welfare program, which is likely to include a four-year limit on cash assistance for adults who are able to work.

We agree that there should be a limit on how long able-bodied people can remain on the welfare rolls. But we are dismayed that the welfare debate is being framed in terms of cutting costs, rather than working to ensure that all families have enough food to eat and adequate shelter.

It is important to taxpayers that the system not be abused by those who simply want a handout. But if a limit is to be placed on how long a person can receive assistance, there has to be some type of assurance that the person can *find* a job.

To that end, both the House and Senate on Thursday agreed on legislation that would provide education and job training for welfare recipients. Final approval of the bills could come this week. They then would go to the governor for her signature.

It is essential that aid recipients have the opportunity to gain skills if they are going to successfully move from public assistance to the work force. But placing an inflexible limit on cash assistance could prove harmful for those aid recipients - and their children - whose eligibility expires but they still are unable to find gainful employment.

We agree with those who say that while a limit on receiving assistance is needed, welfare reform should allow some discretion when extended benefits are warranted under certain circumstances.

Another point of contention among lawmakers is a proposed new three-strike policy for recipients who fail to comply with work or training requirements. Under the proposal, first and second offenses would result in suspension of cash assistance for 90 days, and a third offense would bring a two-year ban on aid. Some argue that the two-year ban - which would be counted as part of the four-year limit on welfare - is too harsh. But would it be anymore harsh than the rules that govern the workplace? People who do not comply with the requirements of their job are not given a two-year suspension - they're *fired*.

We appreciate the fact that legislators are working to find a balance between providing assistance for those families down on their luck and yet preventing taxpayers from being taken advantage of by those who simply do not want to work. Limiting the amount of welfare a person can receive is reasonable, but providing some flexibility for individual circumstances also is needed.

Originally published December 11, 2005

House, Senate to finish work on welfare, year-end expenditures

*By AMY F. BAILEY
Associated Press Writer
Dec 13, 12:51 PM EST*

LANSING, Mich. (AP) -- State lawmakers worked Tuesday to wrap up a number of issues before beginning their holiday recess, including significant changes to Michigan's welfare program and several year-end expenditures.

Senators and representatives met privately for much of the morning to work out the final details on bills that would provide welfare recipients more time to get an education and pursue job training opportunities while limiting most to four years of cash assistance.

Much of the debate over the changes centered on limiting benefits for able-bodied adults and imposing tougher sanctions on those who don't follow program requirements.

Some Republicans have argued that setting a limit on cash assistance would help motivate those receiving welfare checks to get the training needed to work in a long-term job rather than one that pays minimum wage.

Setting stringent penalties for noncompliance would make recipients accountable for the average \$415 monthly payment they get per household from the program, they said.

A number of Democrats, however, have said that a strict four-year limit would hurt people who lose their jobs when the economy slows down and those who cannot work because of an injury or another unplanned emergency. A two-year ban on cash assistance for adults who do not comply with requirements would ultimately penalize recipients' children, they said.

Despite those differences, Rep. Jerry Kooiman, a Grand Rapids Republican who helped develop the bills, said he was confident the two sides would reach a compromise by the end of the day. "We're close," he said Tuesday afternoon. "We'll get it done."

Without a deal, lawmakers could extend the Dec. 31 expiration date for several provisions in the welfare law and resume negotiations when they return next year. Bills introduced this year carry over to 2006.

The House and Senate also were expected Tuesday to take final action on several other pieces of legislation, including bills that would provide tax credits for manufacturers. A vote also was planned on a spending bill for expenditures that have to be made by the end of the year, such as funding for security at the Feb. 5 Super Bowl in Detroit.

The welfare bills are House Bills 4121 and 5438-46; Senate Bills 892-94.

On the Net:

Michigan Legislature: <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

Michigan League for Human Services: <http://www.milhs.org>

States' Food-Stamp Fight Intensifies

Push to Extend Benefits to Working Poor Collides With Congress's Push to Cut Deficit

By JANE ZHANG

NEARLY A DECADE after welfare reform, some states are placing a new emphasis on food stamps as a program to improve the nutrition of the working poor. But their efforts to sign up more families have put them on a collision course with the Bush administration and House Republicans who believe the government should rein in food-stamps coverage.

States have been working to broaden the reach of food stamps, in part because of concerns that welfare reform pushed many low-income residents off other as-

sistance programs. A number of states, led by Michigan and North Dakota, in recent years simplified their application process and aggressively recruited the working poor. On average, 25.5 million Americans received food stamps last year, up from 17.2 million in 2000.

That trend is colliding with Congress's drive to attack red ink in the federal budget. The food-stamp program is the federal government's biggest nutrition-assistance program, and while it picks up the cost for food purchases, it splits administrative costs with the states. The federal government's food-

stamps tab rose to \$27 billion in 2004 from \$17.1 billion in 2000, an increase that has made the program a ripe target for budget cutters on Capitol Hill.

The five-year, \$50 billion deficit-reduction bill that passed the House last month would cut spending on food stamps by \$700 million. The Senate bill didn't include such a cut, and it is uncertain whether the provision will remain after House and Senate conferees work out differences in the two bills.

The House bill cuts spending mainly by changing some eligibility requirements. It also would take away some flexibility that states have used to boost enrollment.

In Oregon, for example, some families with gross incomes that are 185% of the poverty level can obtain food stamps if certain deductions, primarily for housing and child care, bring income down to the poverty level of \$19,350 for a family of four. If the House bill is adopted, that cap would drop to 130% of the poverty level, and most of the recipients who stand to lose their eligibility have incomes hovering just above that cutoff, says Stacy Dean, director of food stamp and immigrant policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Food stamps, an outgrowth of the Great Depression, started out by giving recipients orange and blue stamps that could be redeemed for food. Coupons eventually replaced the stamps, and just last year, a debit-card system was launched, taking some of the stigma out of using paper coupons and also cutting down error rates. Reflecting the changes, some states have renamed their programs, such as the Basic Food Program in Washington state, the Food Assistance Program in Michigan, and the Food Support Program in Minnesota.

"I think we've seen a positive attitude in general," says Jean Daniel, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "This is really a nutrition—not a wel-

fare—program.” And even in the face of cutbacks, Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns last week announced that the department has available \$1 million for public agencies as well as nonprofit, community and faith-based organizations to reach out to potential food-stamp recipients.

Efforts to increase awareness of the program nudged participation rates up to 56% of those eligible in 2003, the latest figure available, according to Mathematica Policy Research, which analyzed the program for the Agriculture Department. The rate had been as high as 75% before the 1996 welfare-reform law took effect, but had plunged to 53% by 2001.

The House bill could put a damper on further outreach. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities figures that Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Dakota, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin would be hit hardest by the changes in eligibility. Overall, it figures, some 150,000 people might be removed from the program, in addition to 70,000 legal immigrants who would become ineligible under a provision that increases their residency requirement to seven years from five years.

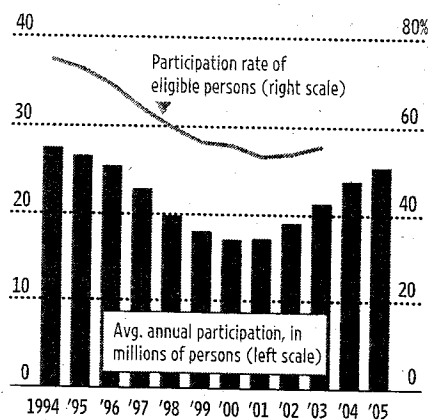
In Oregon alone, the House bill would cancel benefits for about 16,000 families, or 40,000 recipients, including 12,000 schoolchildren, says Sue Abrams, administrator of the Office of Self-Sufficiency Programs at the Oregon Department of Human Services. The state has boosted its participation rate from 70% in 1999 to 83% in 2003, the highest in the nation.

Trudy Flores signed up six months ago. “We went from having to worry about whether we will have enough money for food to always having the [food-stamps] card,” said Ms. Flores, a graduate student and a part-time editor in Portland, Ore. Her husband, Juan, is unemployed, but

Food Stamps in Focus

Participation in the federal Food Stamp program has rebounded from recent lows, but many people who are eligible still don't take advantage. A look at participation rates nationally and in Oregon, the state with the highest participation rate in 2002 and 2003.

U.S. food stamp participation



Note: Participation rates aren't available after 2003. Rates prior to 1999 were based on September figures, while those for 1999 on were based on the entire fiscal year.

Oregon

By the numbers

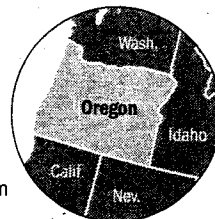
■ **Percent of eligible persons** who participated in food-stamp program in 2003: **83%**

■ **Maximum monthly benefits** received by a participating individual: **\$152**

■ **Maximum monthly benefits** received by participating family of four: **\$506**

■ **Maximum monthly income** an individual can earn and still be eligible: **\$1,475**

■ **Maximum monthly income** a family of four can earn and still be eligible: **\$2,983**



Source: Mathematica Policy Research for the Department of Agriculture

sometimes gets temporary jobs. “We might not have money for toothpaste and soap, but we always have food to feed our kids.”

Enrolling in the Food Stamp Program, which provided the family with \$499 last month, has also opened doors to other benefits, including Oregon's phone assistance program, which has halved the Flores's monthly phone bill to about \$13. Her daughters, age 6 and 10, also get free school lunches. But that could change if the House bill becomes law. “It just makes me mad and makes me sad,” Ms. Flores says. “It's stressful trying to figure out whether you'll make ends meet for the month.”

Because recipients like Ms. Flores often are enrolled automatically in other government-assistance programs, such as school lunches, Medicaid and energy assistance, many would leave those programs if they had to apply separately, says Cassandra Garrison, public-policy manager for the Oregon Food Bank. “So it basically backedpedals the success we've had in the last couple

of years,” says Ms. Garrison. “At this level, between 130-185% [of the federal poverty level], these are working poor families. ... We want them to keep working.”

Ms. Garrison worries that if the House bill is enacted, her food bank once again will see a swell of clients, much as it did after welfare reform was adopted. Worse, she says, illnesses linked to malnutrition could rise.

The prospect of paring rolls at a time when families face high heating costs, is another worry, particularly for those in Northern states, says Barbara Van Buregel, acting director for the integrated access and support programs in Maine's Department of Health and Human Services. The state's food-stamps participation rate jumped to 95% in 2004 from 72% in 2003, and residents automatically receive food stamps if they are issued cash assistance. To slash food benefits, says Ms. Van Buregel, “would be detrimental to our population.”

Teen sentenced for assaulting caseworker

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

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A state caseworker who was trying to find shelter for a runaway Battle Creek teen said she feared for her life when he sexually assaulted her and stole her car.

"The terror I felt for myself and for my unborn child, I played over and over in my mind to try to figure out what happened," the victim said before her assailant, Traeshawn McKinney Carter, 17, was sentenced on Monday. "I hope no other woman has to go through what I went through because of you."

Although the victim's name appears in court documents and was stated in court, it is the policy of the Kalamazoo Gazette not to identify those who have been sexually assaulted.

The caseworker was trying to find space for Carter at a shelter for runaways when she was assaulted in February.

Carter was 16 at the time.

"I have no doubt the taxpayers will have to pay for you for the rest of your life," the victim said.

Carter apologized for his actions.

"I know it was wrong," he said.

Carter crossed the thin line between order and chaos, said Kalamazoo County Circuit Judge Philip D. Schaefer.

Carter is to serve concurrent terms of 19 months to 15 years in prison for the criminal-sexual conduct and nine to 25 years for carjacking, with credit for 143 days served.

Mother charged in baby's death

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

By Nate Reens
The Grand Rapids Press

IONIA -- Police say a Belding woman knew what she was doing when she allegedly laid her 3-month-old daughter, born with spina bifida, facedown on a pillow in March.

Authorities initially ruled Janie Nash's death accidental due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, but further investigation allegedly shows the child's mother, Amy Nash, 22, ended her daughter's life to relieve her of living with multiple birth defects.

"(Amy Nash) originally said she found her daughter facedown, but further information developed and she ended up making an admission that she put her daughter there, knowing what the consequences would be," said Jessica Wierckz, Ionia County's chief assistant prosecutor.

Nash is charged with second-degree murder, alleging she intended to create a high risk of death or great harm. The felony is punishable by up to life in prison.

Police said Nash wrote a confession, which was read at her preliminary hearing last week in Ionia County District Court.

"My child Janin Nash had spina bifta, club foot and water on the brain," the note said. "I was under so much sterss of her and the medklle stuff and little or no help from Rob I snapt and my baby died on 3/13/05. I love my daughters so much more then life. I know laying Janie on a pillow face down she would die. I rote this on my own free will."

Following the hearing, Nash was ordered to stand trial in Ionia County Circuit Court on the murder charge, Wierckz said. She is being held in Ionia County Jail.

Nash's husband, Robert Nash, and her defense attorney, William Van Eck, could not be reached for comment.

The Belding couple lost custody of another daughter after police began investigating Janie's death.

Wierckz said the preschool-age child was placed in foster care this summer for alleged excessive discipline by Amy Nash.

The couple's parental rights to the surviving child have not been terminated.

Mother charged in infant's death

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

By Nate Reens

MUSKEGON CHRONICLE NEWS SERVICE

Police say a Belding woman knew what she was doing when she allegedly laid her 3-month-old daughter, born with spina bifida, facedown on a pillow in March.

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"(Amy Nash) originally said she found her daughter facedown, but further information developed and she ended up making an admission that she put her daughter there, knowing what the consequences would be," said Jessica Wierckz, Ionia County's chief assistant prosecutor.

Nash is charged with second-degree murder, alleging she intended to create a high risk of death or great harm through her actions. The felony is punishable by up to life in prison.

In a written confession signed in May by Nash and admitted as evidence in a probable cause hearing last week in Ionia District Court, she said her child suffered from club feet and water on the brain in addition to spina bifida. She was ordered to stand trial in Ionia County Circuit Court on the murder charge following the hearing, Wierckz said.

In an unedited letter of admission, according to the Ionia Sentinel-Standard, Nash said:

"I snapt and my baby died on 3/13/05. ...I know lying Janie on a pillow face down she would die."

I rote this on my own free will."

Nash is being held in Ionia County Jail.

Neither Nash's husband, Robert Nash, nor her defense attorney, William Van Eck, could be reached for comment.

The Belding couple lost custody of another daughter since police began investigating Amy Nash for her alleged role in Janie's death, Wierckz said.

The preschool-age child was placed in foster care this summer for alleged excessive discipline by the Belding woman.

Their parental rights to the surviving child have not been terminated.

McNeely children remain in the care of relatives

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

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Two adopted sons of the Rev. Jerry McNeely were removed from his care last week after a three-day jury trial in Kalamazoo County Circuit Court Family Division.

The ruling Thursday came nearly three months after the boys, ages 13 and 15, were removed from McNeely's Bruce Drive home after allegations of neglect and abuse were made.

The boys, whose names are not being printed in the Kalamazoo Gazette because they are juveniles, will live with relatives, Kalamazoo County Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Nancy Skocelas said.

McNeely, president of the Metropolitan Kalamazoo Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and recently ousted pastor of Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, declined to comment for this report. McNeely also made an unsuccessful bid last month for the Kalamazoo City Commission.

At a future hearing, which has yet to be scheduled, Skocelas said officials will attempt to determine what services are needed ``for this family to come back together."

``The goal of a child protective hearing is to reunite the family," she said.

Beginning in early May and leading up to the boys' removal in June, police were called to McNeely's house several times on reports that one of the boys was locked out of the house, officials have said. Several other incidents were reported to police in which the boy was not allowed into the house or McNeely said he had run away.

In October, McNeely filed motions requesting the proceedings be adjourned and the trial venue be changed. He also challenged the jury selection process, calling it constitutionally invalid and charging that ``it excludes blacks, especially those living in the city."

Michael Skinner, the Eaton County visiting judge assigned to the case, denied McNeely's motions.

McNeely represented himself in the trial after the judge granted a request by his attorney to withdraw.

McNeely faces no legal sanctions because the case is a civil matter, Skocelas said.

December 13, 2005

Women having sex with boys: Is it child abuse? N.Y. judge calls one woman's behavior unacceptable, but adds teen was not victimized by her.

Kate Zernike / New York Times

When Sandra Beth Geisel, a former Catholic schoolteacher, was sentenced to six months in jail last month for having sex with a 16-year-old student, she received sympathy from a surprising source.

Judge Stephen Herrick of Albany County Court in New York told her she had "crossed the line" into "totally unacceptable" behavior. But, he added, the teenager was a victim in only the strictly legal sense. "He was certainly not victimized by you in any other sense of the word," the judge said.

The prosecutor and a lawyer for the boy's family called the judge's comments outrageous. But is it possible that the 16-year-old wasn't really harmed?

The past few months have produced a spate of cases in which women have been prosecuted for having sex with boys. But when the women face prison, questions are raised about where to set the age of consent. Because many of those named as victims refused to testify against the women in what they said were consensual relationships, not everyone agrees that the cases involve child abuse.

"We need to untangle the moral issues from the psychological issues from the legal issues," said Carol Tavris, the author of "The Mismeasure of Women" and a social psychologist. "That's the knot. You may not like something, but does that mean it should be illegal? If we have laws that are based on moral notions and developmental notions that are outdated, do we need to change the laws?"

Though it might seem that way from the headlines, women having sex with teenage boys is not new. A federal Department of Education study called "Educator Sexual Misconduct," released last year, found that 40 percent of the educators reported for sexual misconduct with students were women.

Charol Shakeshaft, the author of the study and a professor of education at Hofstra University, said that even when the woman is not a teacher, the relationships are not healthy. "A 16-year-old is just not fully developed," she said. "Male brains tend to develop the part that can make decisions about whether it is a wise thing to do later."

But several studies have raised questions about whether the recent cases should be filed under child sex abuse.

The most controversial study was published in 1998 in Psychological Bulletin. The article, a statistical reanalysis of 59 studies of college students who said they were sexually abused in childhood, concluded that the effects of such abuse "were neither pervasive nor typically intense, and that men reacted much less negatively than women."

"Abuse implies harm in a scientific usage, and the term should not be in use if there is consent and no evidence of harm," said Bruce Rind, an author of the study and a psychology professor at Temple University.

This view could prove a hard sell, politically and legally. The article in *Psychological Bulletin* was roundly criticized by prominent conservatives and denounced in Congress, as was the judge in Geisel's case.

In 2003, Bruce Gaeta, a New Jersey judge, was reprimanded by the state's highest court for characterizing an encounter between a 43-year-old female teacher and a 13-year-old boy who had been a student as "something between two people that clicked beyond the teacher-student relationship."

Thirteen? Rind and others agree that that is too low to set the age of consent. .

But Rind and others point out that Canada and about half of Europe have set the age of consent at 14 after recommendations by national commissions.

Even those who argue for more protection of children agree that the laws in this country can be arbitrary.

"I'm torn, I don't know," Shakeshaft said. "It would be my belief that people aren't formed by 16. On the other hand, my mother married my father at 16 and they were married 65 years."

Notorious cases

Sandra Beth Geisel, a former Catholic schoolteacher, was found guilty of having sex with a 16-year-old student.

Debra LaFave of Florida, a teacher, faces trial for sex with a 14-year-old student.

Lisa Lynette Clark of Georgia was impregnated by her son's 15-year-old friend, whom she married a day before she was arrested.

Mary Kay Letourneau had sex with Vili Fualaau when he was 12.

Silvia Johnson of Colorado was sentenced to 30 years for having sex with teenagers and providing drugs and alcohol.

Pamela Rogers Turner, a Tennessee teacher, was sentenced for sex with a 13-year-old boy.

Charity hits goal

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

JEREMIAH STETTTLER
THE SAGINAW NEWS

Bankruptcy and bad weather threatened to spoil the giving season for United Way of Saginaw County.

But they didn't.

Charity leaders have announced that United Way has reached its \$2.8 million goal, despite the bankruptcy of Saginaw County's largest employer, Delphi Corp., and a flood of contributions to the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Instead, donations climbed above expectations for the first time in five years. The last time was in 2000, when the charity raised \$3.5 million.

United Way backers call it a "shot in the arm of positive news" at a time when the state has suffered so much bad.

"Even though we have been losing jobs, our donations have been steadfast," said Cherrie Benchley, president and chief executive officer of United Way. "We have been able to stay around \$3 million."

Officials would not say exactly how much money they have received -- that announcement will have to wait until the "Victory Celebration" breakfast on Wednesday -- but said the charity has passed the \$2.8 million mark.

While the goal is lower than in previous years, charity leaders said it was challenging when considering the economic travails mid-Michigan faced this year.

"We were told that \$2.5 million would be an aggressive goal," said campaign Chairman Herb Spence. "We really thought that would be a stretch at the time. But it came down to the fact that we knew our agencies wouldn't be able to survive. We needed to be more aggressive than that."

United Way provides funding for 24 nonprofit agencies that offer 54 initiatives ranging from family counseling to youth outreach.

Even with meeting the fund-raising goal, Spence said the agencies will have to operate on "bare bones" budgets. It could get even more difficult if job cuts or salary reductions prevent some people from following through on their contributions.

For now, charity members are celebrating a goal reached.

They also are touting contributions from companies such as General Motors Corp.'s Powertrain Division and Covenant HealthCare. The first gave a corporate donation of \$30,000, even as it struggles financially. The second offered a first-time gift of \$50,000.

Officials also applaud Delphi Corp., which saw a mere 17 percent drop in donations -- to \$649,000 from \$785,000 -- when uncertainties about employment could have slashed contributions even more.

"Even in hard times, these people are willing to support the community and the people who are less fortunate than they are," Benchley said.

Jeremiah Stettler is a staff writer at the Saginaw News. You may reach him at 776-9685.

United Way is determined to reach its goal

Extending campaign appropriate

United Way of St. Clair County leaders took an unusual step last week on behalf of the group's 2005 fund-raising campaign. Although Thursday's event at Port Huron's Thomas Edison Inn was supposed to celebrate the end of fund-raising efforts, United Way officials extended the campaign. Jan. 19 is the new deadline. The reason, United Way Campaign Chairman Bob Cook said, was to give several employers time to complete their campaigns.

The United Way's annual plea for help came at a difficult time this year. When the campaign started in September, the attention of our community and the nation was fixed on the Gulf Coast and the devastation Hurricane Katrina wrought.

The proliferation of relief efforts that sprang up here and throughout the nation were a tribute to Americans' compassion. Unfortunately, local efforts also appeared to overshadow United Way efforts to help those in need much closer to home.

Thursday's totals fell short of this year's \$1.625 million campaign goal.

The United Way raised \$1,396,202 - about 86% of the objective.

Some might look at the tally and say it's good enough - but not United Way officials. Last year's campaign fell short of its \$1.7 million goal. It raised \$1.625 million instead.

United Way leaders know the need in our community is greater than \$1.625 million or even \$1.7 million. This time, they are determined to make sure the 2005 fund-raising goal is met.

Granted, it is surprising, and maybe unprecedented, to extend this year's campaign into January. There are a lot people in this community, however, who are in desperate need.

With the campaign only 14% shy of its goal, it would be a shame to stop now, when yet uncounted contributors could put it over the top.

Port Huron Times Herald

Originally published December 13, 2005

Salvation Army donations down

Givers may be diverting funds to Katrina victims.

PUBLISHED: December 13, 2005

By Dan Heaton
Macomb Daily Business Editor

Salvation Army bell-ringers are taking in fewer donations so far this year. The group's southern Macomb County region is running about \$15,000 behind last year's donation levels, the Christian charitable organization said.

As of Friday, the Salvation Army of southern Macomb County, which serves Warren, Eastpointe, Center Line, Roseville, St. Clair Shores and the Grosse Pointes, had collected about \$133,000 of its \$275,000 seasonal goal, about a 5 percent decrease from the total collected by Dec. 9, 2004.

The Salvation Army's Capt. Caleb Senn said it's possible the \$15,000 drop in the red kettle collection drive is because people have given to Hurricane Katrina victims.

"The outpouring of help for the Salvation Army hurricane relief effort has been tremendous; however, we still need funds to help local residents all year round," Senn said. "We are counting on the great residents of this community to help us reach our goal this Christmas season."

Senn said traditionally, the Salvation Army's best days for donations in the kettle campaign are Friday and Saturday, but this year those days have seen donation levels on par with the rest of the week.

"The situation is the same throughout the Eastern Michigan division," he said.

With the arrival of colder weather, the Salvation Army's local operations have moved into high gear.

"Our family shelter has been at capacity since October and probably will be now at least until early spring," Senn said.

The Warren center has a 50-bed homeless shelter that can accommodate families. In addition, it provides food assistance and utility bill assistance to families and individuals.

While the Salvation Army may be struggling locally to collect kettle donations, the Chronicle of Philanthropy reported last week that most major charitable organizations are likely to end the year having raised record sums.

Most organizations say they have recovered after a slowdown in donations just after Hurricane Katrina struck.

According to the organization GivingUSA, Americans donated about \$248 billion to charitable groups in the country in 2004. Stacy Palmer, editor of the Washington, D.C.-based Chronicle of Philanthropy, said she expects 2005 giving to top that level.

The Salvation Army, she said, typically ranks first or second in the nation in total donations received over the course of the year.

"Charitable giving is really tied to the economy," Palmer said. "So if the economy is tight in Michigan, that is going to impact the donations."

Published December 13, 2005
[From the Lansing State Journal]

Mason kids 'Stuff the Bus' for food banks

By Nicole Geary
Lansing State Journal

MASON - Fifth-graders filed on to a yellow school bus Monday morning - but they weren't going on this field trip. Instead, they filled the seats with boxes and bags and headed back to class.

"It's for the people who don't have much food," Courtney DeWeerd said after lugging collected canned goods from the doors of Steele Elementary School.

"Especially during Christmas," added E.J. Rumler, 10.

"Yeah, we thought it would be nice," said Courtney, also 10.

By Wednesday, the bus will be nearly overflowing and making its way to Capital Area Community Services, which will distribute the supplies to area food banks.

It's the second year for the Mason Public Schools' Stuff the Bus campaign, a joint effort among six of the district's schools. Summit High School students will unload the bus at the conclusion.

Steele was the second building to add its share of goods as the bus travels around town.

"I brought in 12 things," Alex Whitmer, 11, said proudly. "I had it laying around my house."

For every nonperishable item they contributed, students have a chance to win one of four sleds in a drawing at school Friday.

The extra incentive increased the amount of donated food this year, Steele Principal Kathy Dean said.

Still, the program has been a valuable real-life lesson in giving.

"Kids need to know they're part of a larger community," Dean said. "This is just one of those pieces that lets them know the needs are out there."

Contact Nicole Geary at 377-1066 or ngeary@lsj.com.

Salvation Army drive continues

*By: Monroe Evening News staff story
updated December 13, 2005 11:17AM*

The Salvation Army's annual kettle drive needs a quick boost to avoid falling behind for the year.

Maj. Jimmy Wilson, commander of the Monroe County Salvation Army, said Monday that the annual Christmas drive is falling a little behind last year's amount.

"I am confident the citizens of Monroe County will come through in order to assist their fellow citizens who are in great need," Maj. Wilson said. "We are approximately \$9,500 short of where we were last year at this time."

The Salvation Army's annual goal is \$210,000. Officials report donations of \$47,000 toward that goal thus far. The money is used for food baskets, clothing, toys and services provided by the agency year-round. That includes lodging, food, clothing, prescriptions, utility assistance, rental assistance and other services.

"If we do not meet our goal, we will have to look at cutting services to the poor," Maj. Wilson said. "We believe this will not be necessary as everyone partners with us in the last few weeks of our Christmas campaign. Together, we will meet the need at the point of need."

Anyone wishing to donate to the Salvation Army may mail donations to 815 E. First St., Monroe. Donations may also be placed in a red kettle. For additional information, call 241-0440.

Warm the Children Campaign

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

By Jaclyn Roeschkejroeschke@citpat.com -- 768-4945

Community donations will buy more than 900 local children new winter clothes this season as part of Jackson's annual Warm the Children campaign.

More than \$40,000 was donated by the local community, and every child who signed up for the program will be outfitted with \$83 worth of clothing.

About 850 of the 904 children who signed up have already received new clothes, and Gary Klump, the Citizen Patriot's assistant controller, said there are enough donations left to buy clothing for the remaining children.

Last year, only about 600 children were signed up for the program because organizers were concerned they wouldn't have enough donations to buy all the children clothes.

This year, with an extra 300 signed up, Karen Dods of the Jackson Junior Welfare League said she was concerned about running out of donations.

"I'm thrilled they had enough money for everyone," Dods said.

"It was something I was concerned about from the beginning."

The program, which is sponsored by the Community Action Agency, the Jackson Junior Welfare League and the Citizen Patriot, pairs needy children with local volunteers who help them shop for winter clothing. Each child is given a voucher for the clothing, which the volunteers help them spend.

But in making sure everyone is outfitted this year, Klump said the program is running out of funds for next year. Usually organizers hope to save at least \$10,000 from the previous year to get the program running the next year.

A donation of \$10,000 from Meijer Inc. each year boosts the cause, but Klump said community donations really fuel the program.

Because of the saved donations and the funds from Meijer, this year's program started out with \$30,000. Klump said that allowed about 330 children to receive their clothes.

"We're doing fine for this year, but next year could be a big problem," he said. "The \$10,000 Meijer gives us only allows us to shop for 120 children, and you really need to shop for more to kick the program into gear."

Klump said the Citizen Patriot collects donations for the program throughout the year, but most of the funds come in before Christmas.

While organizers might be worried about the program's future, Warm the Children has supplied more than 6,100 local children with winter clothes since its inception in 1998.

Klump said that number makes him proud of what the program has accomplished over the years. "It really is a good cause," he said. "Every year it helps a lot of children get Christmas presents."

Day care cited for letting in accused child abuser

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

ALPINE TOWNSHIP -- The state has cited a day-care center for violating licensing rules after learning a man accused of sexually assaulting children was seen inside the building. State investigators in September told officials at the DLK Family and Friends Day Care Center, 3999 Alpenhorn Drive NW, that Kristopher Cross, 33, was not to be there for any reason, state records show.

But investigators said they determined Cross was there at least twice in November -- after he was criminally charged with assaulting children at a different day care he and his wife ran.

The state sent the violation notice Dec. 5 to Martha Kadolph, who holds the center's license.

Kadolph has said she sold Family and Friends to Cross and his wife, Amanda, but continues to run it.

Amanda Cross on Monday said she and her husband no longer own the center.

"I have nothing more to do with Family and Friends," she said. "With all this bad publicity, we've been banned from there."

Kristopher Cross, 33, faces charges of sexually assaulting three girls, ages 5 through 7, from late 2001 to 2004 at the day care he and his wife operated at their home, 2642 Fuller Ave. NE in Grand Rapids. Charges were filed in September.

The state recently suspended that home's license.

A hearing is scheduled Wednesday in Grand Rapids District Court to determine whether to toss out evidence in the case against Cross, including alleged computer child porn found during a search of the Fuller home.

On Friday, Cross is to appear in court to determine if there is enough evidence to send him to trial.

He has denied the allegations. He is not accused of crimes at Family and Friends.

A licensing investigator with the Office of Children and Adult Licensing saw Cross at Family and Friends while inspecting the center on Sept. 28, records show.

The investigator learned that day he was "accused of inappropriately touching day-care children" at the Fuller home, state records show.

The investigator immediately told Kadolph and Amanda Cross that Kristopher Cross "should not be at the (Alpine Township) child-care center for any reason," the report shows.

Kadolph told the state investigator Kristopher Cross tried to enter the center at least once after that, but she told him to leave.

Cross has told The Press he was at the center, but only on weekends for maintenance when no children were around.

But three workers at the center told the investigator that Cross was there Nov. 2, a Wednesday, to assemble baby cribs. Although children were at the center that day, he did not have contact with them, the workers said.

On Nov. 18, a Friday, he returned to drop off milk, then left with his wife to pick up day-care children from a school, workers told the state. Kadolph said he did not enter the center that day. The workers said "they had not seen anything that they were concerned about while (Cross) was at the center," the report states.

Kadolph said she received the state's violation notice on Friday and has not had a chance to respond. She refused further comment.

Michigan, other states decry federal cuts

Monday, December 12, 2005

By Sarah Kellogg
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Michigan could lose as much as \$1 billion in federal assistance over the next five years if Congress approves legislation this week reducing funding increases for Medicaid, food stamps and child support.

Slowing the growth in federal funding to the states would be disastrous, Michigan officials say, noting that the state's sluggish economy has made safety-net programs essential to struggling working families.

"From our perspective, the cuts contemplated in Washington are unacceptable," said Liz Boyd, a spokeswoman for Gov. Jennifer Granholm. "They would have a Draconian impact on our programs."

With the holidays just weeks away, members of Congress are pushing the reductions as part of their massive budget reconciliation bill -- an omnibus bill that lays out spending and policy priorities for the next five years.

Republican lawmakers defend the reductions in social programs, arguing that the proposed budget trimming is merely a decrease in proposed spending increases.

"We're not cutting these programs at all," said Rep. Dave Camp, R-Midland. "I think we have an obligation to the taxpayers to make sure we have a very strong safety net and that it doesn't grow at a rate that isn't sustainable."

Camp said Medicaid alone will grow at 7.5 percent instead of 7.7 percent over the course of the budget, while the overall growth in federal spending will continue at 6.3 percent instead of 6.4 percent.

The House version of the reconciliation bill would reduce federal funding by \$50 billion over the next five years. The Senate bill would shrink funding by \$35 billion. A joint conference committee has been charged with working out the differences and will continue those negotiations this week.

Concerns about the drop in federal revenues prompted Granholm to temporarily withdraw her support for \$500 million in business tax breaks pending in the state Legislature. The governor said the state could not weather a hit of \$1 billion in federal aid and reduce tax revenues at the same time.

Anti-poverty groups suggest the onslaught on human service programs is part of the GOP Congress' effort to generate enough money to offset legislation that would extend federal tax reductions for another five years at a cost of about \$56 billion.

Dec 12, 7:21 PM EST

Negotiators Make Changes to Spending Bill

By ANDREW TAYLOR
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) -- House and Senate negotiators made modest changes to a major spending bill that would freeze or cut back a wide variety of education and social programs in hopes of successfully capping a GOP drive to halt the growth of most domestic agencies' budgets.

An earlier version of the measure, which would provide \$602 billion for a broad spectrum of health, education and labor programs, was defeated on the House floor last month amid opposition from GOP moderates and rural lawmakers, among others. The rural lawmakers were unhappy with cuts to a variety of programs aimed at improving rural health care.

The bill contains \$142.5 billion at lawmakers' discretion for the departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, with the bulk of the rest of the funds being automatic payments to the Medicare and Medicaid programs.

To revive the measure, senior House Appropriations Committee Republicans such as Rep. Ralph Regula of Ohio and Jerry Lewis of California, the committee's chairman, shifted \$90 million into rural health programs such as grants for community health centers and funding for training and support programs designed to encourage more physicians to practice in rural areas.

The add-ons were financed by a cut of \$120 million in pandemic preparedness funds. That cut, in turn, may be filled in when lawmakers address President Bush's \$7 billion request to combat bird flu.

The Appropriations Committee also lost a turf battle with the powerful chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, who insisted negotiators drop a provision to block Medicare beneficiaries from obtaining drugs for erectile dysfunction through the government next year. The ban is already in place for 2007 and beyond, but Ways and Means Chairman Bill Thomas, R-Calif., objected to extending it to 2006 because some providers of the Medicare drug benefit had already entered into contracts to provide the drugs next year.

The changes were minor at best and left intact the core of the bill defeated by the House.

The bill is one of the most thrifty spending measures in recent memory. The pending version contains about 1 percent less than last year in real terms for programs up to the discretion of lawmakers after accounting for the new cost of administering the Medicare prescription drug program. Another 1 percentage point across-the-board cut will essentially erase what few spending increases are included in the bill.

Budgets for special education and for the National Institutes of Health are essentially frozen and steep cuts remain in grant programs for medical training, community colleges, rural health care and state and local health departments, when compared with spending for the last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30.

"Here we are going home for Christmas and we're giving the least fortunate among us more lumps of coal in their stockings," said Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa.

On education, the measure would cut spending on Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative by about 3 percent after years of healthy increases.

The measure still faces close votes in both the House and the Senate and passage of the latest compromise by both House and Senate is no sure thing. House GOP leaders are cautiously optimistic that a repeat of last month's debacle can be avoided. But Senate GOP moderates are unhappy with the bill, and the defection of only six Republicans could sink it in that chamber. Completion of the labor, health and education bill leaves only the defense measure remaining for Congress to complete before adjourning for the year. That must-pass measure is shaping up as a catchall bill that will carry new funds for hurricane relief and to prevent the spread of avian flu. Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Thad Cochran, R-Miss., has vowed to add billions of dollars to President Bush's request to shift \$17.1 billion in Federal Emergency Management Agency funds to other agencies for longer-term rebuilding projects. Cochran especially wants to help homeowners who lived outside of traditional flood plains - and therefore lacked flood insurance - who lost their homes in Hurricane Katrina's storm surge.

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FEMA Ordered to Extend Hotel Stays

By Spencer S. Hsu Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, December 13, 2005; Page A10

A federal judge in New Orleans yesterday ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency to continue paying the hotel bills of thousands of Hurricane Katrina evacuees until as late as Feb. 7, criticizing the government for inaction 15 weeks after the storm.

U.S. District Judge Stanwood Duval ordered the disaster response agency to pay for storm victims' rooms for at least two weeks once a decision is made on granting them rental housing assistance or until Feb. 7, whichever comes first. The agency had planned to stop subsidizing hotel rooms for evacuees on Jan. 7, in an effort to push them into longer-term housing, which it says is better for them and less costly to the government.

Duval's order applies to thousands of the estimated 85,000 evacuee households whose housing aid applications FEMA has not yet processed. He also called on FEMA to publicize its reversal of strict rules that denied aid to thousands of other evacuees, describing FEMA housing policy shifts as "eccentric and bizarre."

In a 27-page order, Duval issued a stern rebuke to FEMA and the Bush administration for responding sluggishly to a catastrophe that has killed more than 1,200 people and displaced hundreds of thousands of people from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

"Unfortunately it seems as if inaction has been the leit motif of the response to the most severe natural disaster in the nation's history," Duval wrote.

Acknowledging "the immensity of the problems," he wrote: "It is this court's feeling that the initial paralysis stage has passed and all government agencies -- local, state and federal -- should be operating in full tilt to assist the hundreds of thousands of citizens displaced by no fault of their own."

Duval's order came in the early stages of a class-action lawsuit brought on behalf of Katrina victims who have failed to get or been denied housing aid.

FEMA's office of public affairs released a statement yesterday saying that officials are reviewing the decision, which can be appealed, and adding that FEMA has provided rental aid so far to more than 500,000 families.

"The needs of the relative few who remain in hotels and motels are a top priority. FEMA continues to reach out to those evacuees who may not yet know of federal aid they are eligible to receive," the statement said.

Howard Godnick, a private lawyer who, along with several civil rights and public interest law groups, is representing 25 plaintiffs, praised the decision.

"This ruling means that tens of thousands of adults and children who faced homelessness this holiday season will instead find that there is room at the inn," he said.

FEMA is paying for about 42,000 hotel rooms in 47 states and the District in a program that has cost about \$350 million so far. The agency last month announced a Dec. 1 deadline for ending the hotel program and moving evacuees into a rental assistance program, but extended it to Dec. 15 after widespread criticism of the short notice given to victims and state and local governments.

Michigan Report

December 12, 2005

HOUSE G.O.P. OFFERS EXPANDED HEAT ASSISTANCE

More Michigan residents would be eligible for heating assistance and all residents would be eligible for tax breaks on energy efficient products under a plan unveiled Monday by House Republicans.

The Home Energy Assistance and Tax Relief (HEAT Michigan) package would expand the home heating tax credit to those earning no more than 130 percent of poverty. The current limit is 110 percent of poverty. Those poor families would also be eligible for income tax credits for home weatherization projects and for purchasing Energy Star certified appliances.

The seven-bill package would also wrap in bills that would exempt all Energy Star appliance purchases from the sales and use tax.

The package also calls on Congress to provide additional funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. Additional funds beyond the federal support would be provided through a new state fund, the Home Heating Credit Fund, that would use increases in oil and gas severance taxes over 2004-05 levels to cover the credits.

Rep. Mike Nofs (R-Battle Creek), one of the lead sponsors of the package, said the fund was expected to have \$6 million this year and would grow as long as severance tax revenues grew. The fund would not lapse to the general fund if all of the money was not needed for the heating credits.

“We’re trying to make it easier for more families to heat their homes,” Mr. Nofs said.

Democrats praised the announcement, pointing to legislation they championed earlier in the fall to do many of the same things.

“Providing assistance to folks struggling to stay warm this winter should be a number one priority for any legislator,” said Sen. Mark Schauer (D-Battle Creek). “Almost exactly two months ago today, as soon as this winter’s fuel costs projections were available, Senate and House Democrats announced proposals to strengthen assistance programs. I’m glad the Republicans have joined our effort to bring this issue to the forefront.”

Maureen Sorbet with the Department of Human Services said the administration supports efforts to increase assistance for low-income families to meet heating bills, but said she had no comment on the plan unveiled Monday because she did not have details on its funding source.

Terry Stanton with the Department of Treasury said officials in his agency also had not seen details of the plan and so could not comment.

The sales tax exemptions are expected to cost the state as much as \$25 million annually, but Mr. Nofs said that money could be made up in savings from other budget areas.

Bills would help keep poor warm

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

THE SAGINAW NEWS

Two state lawmakers have launched legislation to expand home heating credits for consumers near the poverty level to cope with soaring energy prices.

Republican state Reps. Roger N. Kahn of Saginaw Township and Tim Moore of Farwell unveiled bills that would raise the income level for which people can qualify for a state-backed home heating credit.

Kahn said natural gas prices are projected to rise 40 percent in Michigan this winter, or an average of \$59 a month for the typical home.

"If you're on a fixed income, that is a serious concern and it could be a disaster," said Kahn, who with Moore unveiled the legislation Monday at the Bridgeport Senior Center, 3670 Bridgeport. The Home Energy and Tax Relief legislation would allow people who earn up to 130 percent of the federal poverty level to ask for a heating credit. The present income level is 110 percent of federal poverty level, defined for a family of four as less than \$20,000 annually, Census Bureau statistics show.

The legislation also would expand tax credits to provide sales tax exemptions for buying energy efficient appliances, weatherizing homes, winterizing products and recouping money from the Oil and Gas Severance Tax.

Buyers could qualify on an exemption on a tax return.

Moore said officials have not calculated how much the initiative would take from the increase in the oil and gas tax or how much the initiative would cost.

"It's going to be substantial, but there's a substantial need out there," he said.

The lawmakers indicated they'd like the Legislature to act by early next year.

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[From the Lansing State Journal]

U.P. nursing home blaze kills two 70 others hospitalized after early morning fire

By Paul Newberry
Associated Press

ISHPEMING TWP. - The remnants of a terrifying night were scattered on the snow outside the Upper Peninsula nursing home: a blackened pillow, two purple socks, several blankets. The stench of smoke filled the frigid December air.

"It must have been terrible for those seniors," said Sue Jandron, the clerk of this close-knit township.

The fire early Monday morning forced the evacuation of dozens of elderly people - many unable to walk and wearing nothing but their nightgowns and pajamas, killing two people and sending at least 70 others to area hospitals.

"The north side of the building was black with rolling smoke," said Richard Harvala, assistant chief of the township's volunteer fire department. "We started breaking windows and pulling people out of there."

The temperature was about 14 degrees, with light snow falling, when the blaze was reported just after midnight at the 122-bed Mather Nursing Center in Marquette County. There were 108 elderly and seriously ill residents in the facility, most confined to beds or wheelchairs.

The cause of the fire was under investigation. The fire severely damaged two rooms in the T-shaped building. The front of the building was untouched.

Harvala said the township's 36-person volunteer fire department responded and called in help from two nearby communities. Residents from the neighborhood also pitched in to help with the evacuation.

Nursing home workers appeared to follow proper procedures in dealing with the blaze, Harvala said. Fire doors closed when the alarm went off, ensuring the flames didn't spread to the rest of the facility.

Judge oversteps church-state boundary with sentence to faith-based rehab program

December 12, 2005

A Catholic man convicted of a minor drug charge says he faced a choice that the U.S. Constitution simply does not allow: Convert to another faith or go to jail. The disturbing allegations about a Pentecostal-based drug rehabilitation program in Flint should serve as a reminder to judges not to force offenders to attend programs run by faith-based groups that proselytize their captive audience.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan has filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of Joseph Hanas, 23, who was punished for not completing a residential program at the Inner City Christian Outreach Center. A Genesee County Circuit judge had sentenced Hanas to a year in the center for possession of marijuana with intent to deliver. The charges could have been dismissed if he completed the program. Instead, after seven weeks, Hanas asked the court for placement in a secular program, but was denied. Judge Robert Ransom sentenced him to jail for three months and then to boot camp.

Hanas said Inner City staff called Catholicism witchcraft, took away his rosary and prayer book and required seven hours of daily Bible study. In an interview with a Free Press reporter, Dwight Richard Rottiers, the pastor at Inner City, acknowledged that Hanas was told he had to attend Inner City services and was not allowed to attend Catholic services.

No judge should force anyone to choose between exercising a constitutional right and jail.

At issue is not the good work many faith-based organizations do. The issue here is whether a judge should force offenders to stay in a program that violates their First Amendment rights.

The ACLU suit seeks to overturn Hanas' conviction. It appears that he should prevail, and that judges, who ought to know better, should take heed.

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[From the Lansing State Journal]

Schneider: Labor of love transforms life of wheelchair user

Jeff Zimmerman took a ride down his new wheelchair ramp first thing Monday morning - not because he had someplace to go that early but because he could.

And because he wanted to prove to himself again that his good fortune was not just a dream.

Sure enough, the wheels of Zimmerman's chair crossed the threshold of his home and came to rest on a spacious, sturdy wooden deck. The deck led to a ramp, which carried Zimmerman all the way to independence.

He now can meet the SpecTran driver on his own terms. He can venture outdoors to sit in the morning sunshine, regardless of whether his wife is home. He's free to come and go as he pleases.

Zimmerman's is a life transformed.

"Now I can leave the house on my own," he said, in the awed way of a man coming to realize the possibilities of his new life. "Now my wife doesn't have to schedule all her appointments around me."

Obstacle overcome

As I've written in previous columns, Zimmerman, who has used a wheelchair since he was stabbed during a robbery six years ago, moved into Stonegate Manufactured Housing Community in Delhi Township about 18 months ago.

All that time, Zimmerman's wife has been forced to muscle her husband's wheelchair down the front-porch steps.

Zimmerman drew up plans for a ramp and lined up a volunteer willing to donate the labor, according to all codes and aesthetic requirements. But Stonegate rules demanded that Zimmerman hire a licensed builder to do the work.

That would have put the project way beyond the reach of Zimmerman, a former carpenter who gets by on Supplemental Security Income while preparing for a new career at Lansing Community College.

But after I wrote about Zimmerman, local builders lined up to take on the project. First in line was a group recruited by Ed Jones of St. Johns.

Eager crew

Jones was on the job Sunday, joined by Jeff Prior of East Lansing, and Paul Barker and Bob Earl, both of Haslett.

They not only supplied the labor but bought the materials as well. Roger Smith of Eagle and Lansing plumber Craig Thompson pitched in.

Zimmerman bundled up and supervised the construction.

"I figured that if they were out there in the cold working for me, I should be out there with them," he said.

Somehow, the cold didn't seem to bother Zimmerman.

Said Jones: "A box of SOS pads couldn't have scrubbed the smile off his face."

Jones added: "He sat right on the ramp with his wheels locked, telling us that, without a ramp, he spent a big part of his life locked up in that mobile home."

By the time Jones and his crew put down their tape measures and saws - after dark Sunday - the project was 90 percent complete. Some handrails and skirting will finish the job.

It would be easy to conclude that Zimmerman was the main benefactor here, but Jones would gladly dispute that point. Referring to himself and the others involved in the project, Jones said:

"What a great Christmas present for us ..."



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Michigan Department of Human Services Summarily Suspends the Group Day Care Home License of Mary Walters

December 13, 2005

The Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS), Office of Children and Adult Licensing issued an order of summary suspension and notice of intent to revoke the license of Kent County group day care home provider Mary Walters, 349 Holly Street, SW, Wyoming, Michigan, 49548. This action resulted from a recent investigation of a complaint of the child day care group home.

The December 8, 2005, complaint investigation found violations of the Child Care Organizations Act and/or day care family home promulgated rules requiring "emergency action" under the Michigan Administrative Procedures Act, MCL 24.292(2).

Effective 6:00 p.m., December 12, 2005, the Summary Suspension Order prohibits Mary Walters from operating a group day care home at 349 Holly Street, SW, Wyoming, Michigan, 49548, or at any other address or location. Accordingly, they may not accept children for care after that date and time. The order also requires Mrs. Walters to inform all of the parents of children in their care that her license has been suspended and that they can no longer provide day care.

Mrs. Walters has held a license to operate a group day care home since January 18, 2002. The license was for twelve children.

Michigan law defines a group day care home as a private home in which more than six but not more than 12 minor children are given care and supervision for periods of less than 24 hours a day, unattended by a parent or legal guardian, except children related to an adult member of the family by blood, marriage, or adoption. Group day care home includes a home that gives care to an unrelated minor child for more than four weeks during a calendar year.

For more information, consult DHS Web site at www.michigan.gov/dhs.

State pays 83 as workers and retirees

Beneficiaries shrug off quirk in law

December 13, 2005

BY CHRIS CHRISTOFF

FREE PRESS LANSING BUREAU CHIEF

LANSING -- Eighty-three state government retirees who are collecting pensions also are banking paychecks from the state -- some at higher salaries than when they retired.

That money is on top of retirement checks ranging from \$35 to nearly \$5,000 a month, according to state records obtained by the Free Press.

At least 16 earn more than \$100,000 a year between their retirement and regular pay. Two collect more than \$158,000.

About half pay into a second, 401(k)-style retirement plan with contributions from the state -- up to 7% of an employee's salary. A few are part-time.

Paying employees state salaries while they collect pensions is a legal quirk in a government system that coaxed thousands of workers into early retirement under then-Gov. John Engler in 2002 to trim the workforce, and then decided to hire some back.

Some states either prohibit retirees from returning to state work with full-time wages and full pension, or restrict their salaries. Michigan law requires only that retirees leave state government for 30 days before they can be rehired.

Maryland, Indiana and Wisconsin put salary caps on retirees who are rehired by the state.

Maryland's General Assembly imposes the limit because it views collecting both a full salary and pension as double-dipping, said Howard Pleines, director of legislation for the Maryland retirement system.

"From a taxpayer's perspective, the question is why am I paying you a pension, and you come back to work for a salary again?" Pleines said.

In Michigan, some rehired retirees said they didn't expect to be paid their pensions plus salary when they were rehired.

One of those is Liz Boyd, press secretary for Gov. Jennifer Granholm. Her retirement as spokeswoman for the Secretary of State's Office took effect in February 2003. She now collects a \$59,260 annual pension for 28 years in state government, plus her \$98,800 salary.

Boyd acknowledged the practice might be considered double-dipping, but she decided to take her pension when it was ruled she could, seven months after she retired.

"I spent considerable time thinking about it because I didn't want any bad publicity coming to this office," she said. "I took the job with the expectation I wouldn't be collecting pension. And I didn't for the first seven months." She said the 83 retirees discovered by the Free Press inquiry is a small fraction of the state's 45,600 retirees.

"They don't represent any wholesale effort to circumvent the early retirement program," she said. Of the rehired retirees, 13 work for the House of Representatives and eight work for the Senate. One, Kendall Wingrove, retired from the House Republican press staff and was hired by the Senate Republican press staff.

Ed Dore, chief deputy director for the Michigan Department of Community Health, returned to state work in January knowing he'd receive a combined salary and annual pension. His combined take is \$158,767.

Dore said he took a large pay cut to give up his job at a Lansing hospital and return to state government. He had retired at age 56 in late 2002 as chief operating officer for then-Secretary of State Candice Miller.

Drawing both a paycheck and pension "wasn't an issue with me," Dore said. "I spent 30 years in public service. Frankly, I missed it."

Attorney General Mike Cox declared in late 2003 that paying state retirees a full-time wage and a pension is legal. The ruling came after some 8,000 state workers had retired under an early retirement incentive in 2002.

The practice might be viewed as largesse, but it's not necessarily bad policy if it doesn't cost the state more, said Keith Brainard, researcher for the National Association of State Retirement Administrators.

"It often looks bad," Brainard said. "But you've got a pool of qualified workers and you hate to lose those people."

"Do we want to say, since you're drawing that pension benefit, you are forbidden from working for the employer to whom you might have great value?"

One state, Indiana, taps into that value by allowing state retirees to return to work for the state if they don't yet qualify for Social Security, but earnings are capped at \$25,000 a year.

New legislation in Minnesota would restrict state retirees who want to continue receiving their full pension pay to half-time work or less if they return to work for the state.

More than 36,000 Michigan state employees are covered by traditional pensions, which pay a set monthly amount based on the employees' final salaries and years of work. But the approximately 18,000 hired since 1997 are in a 401(k)-style investment plan, called a defined contribution plan, that workers can tap after retirement.

Michigan is the only state that has replaced a traditional pension with a defined contribution plan for regular state employees. The switch in retirement plans makes it legal for workers who retired to return to state work with both salary and pension pay, the attorney general ruled.

Jan Lazar, a retirement expert with the Michigan Municipal League, said the public is more willing to accept the notion of police or firefighters who retire at an early age and return to work, sometimes for the same community, than for bureaucrats.

Boyd applied for retirement in 2002 under an early retirement incentive aimed at trimming the state workforce. She said she had planned to keep working in the private sector.

But she was recruited to Granholm's staff three days after Granholm was elected governor in November 2002. Boyd joined the new administration, and was told her pension payments would be suspended when she started her new job in February 2003.

Like other retirees hired back, she was allowed to join the newer retirement plan.

Boyd said she questioned the policy of suspending pension pay. The state Department of Management and Budget asked for -- and received -- the opinion from Cox.

Cox ruled that the practice was legal as long as retirees leave their state jobs for a period of time. Starting in late 2003, retirees rehired by the state started getting their pensions, too.

Michael Schmedlen took early retirement in 2002 from the Supreme Court. He did not expect to receive a pension check when he was rehired as chief commissioner, at \$118,872 a year.

"I was not thrilled with it, but I accepted it," Schmedlen said. "This is a lawyer's dream job."

But the attorney general's ruling meant Schmedlen, then 56, could draw a monthly pension of \$3,114. He said that although other people retire from one job and then find another job, "this looks weird because it's the same employer."

Pamela Nyquist retired as assistant secretary to the state Senate in August 2004, also under an early retirement incentive, and was rehired a month later to her former job. She was 60 and had already worked 21 years in both the Senate and state House.

She said she did not intend to return to work after she retired, but that Lt. Gov. John Cherry asked her to come back. She draws a combined pension and salary of \$126,421 a year.

"I think it can be justified in that we have certain skills that are not easily transferred," Nyquist said.

For Keith Claus, coming back to work for the Michigan Department of Transportation wasn't a matter of stuffing his bank account. It was survival, he said. He gets \$36,892 in pension a year, and a salary of \$68,765.

He was out of work for two years after he retired from the state in 2001 and went to work for a private contractor who laid him off. Claus retired at age 56 after 37 years with the transportation department.

Claus said when his wife died in 2004 it left him with no income and piles of her medical bills. He faced losing his home in Laingsburg, a suburb of Lansing.

In May 2004 he was hired at MDOT.

He said when he learned he could collect his pension with a paycheck, "it was a pleasant surprise."

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The richest on the list

Of the 83 State of Michigan employees who also collect state pensions, these 16 make at least \$100,000 in salary and pension:

Name	Department	Annualized pension	Current pay	Total
Ed Dore	Comm. Health	\$38,772	\$119,995	\$158,767
Liz Boyd	Governor	\$59,260	\$98,800	\$158,060
Michael Schmedlen	Supreme Court	\$37,373	\$118,872	\$156,245
Robert Swanson	Labor/Econ. Growth	\$24,699	\$121,992	\$146,691
Cynthia Maritato	Human Services	\$41,041	\$92,726	\$133,767
Rodney Stokes	DNR	\$46,953	\$83,200	\$130,153
Pamela Nyquist	State Senate	\$35,733	\$90,688	\$126,421
Jeanette Klemczak	Comm. Health	\$17,911	\$107,328	\$125,239
Rickey Wright	State House	\$39,525	\$82,264	\$121,789
Alexander Davlantes	Education	\$51,525	\$62,504	\$114,029
Linda Ann Forward	Education	\$33,642	\$79,602	\$113,244
Ian McLauchlan	Labor/Econ. Growth	\$38,618	\$74,339	\$112,957
Roger Peters	Labor/Econ. Growth	\$49,232	\$61,339	\$110,571
Margaret Johnson	Treasury	\$29,503	\$76,523	\$106,026
Keith Claus	Transportation	\$36,892	\$68,765	\$105,657
Gerald Gill	State Senate	\$35,768	\$68,494	\$104,262

How other states limit double dips

- Restrictions that some other states -- but not Michigan -- have used when rehiring retirees:
- **Wisconsin:** State retirees who return to work are limited to one-third of full-time or their pension checks are suspended.
- **North Carolina:** Rehired retirees can earn no more than 50% of their last 12 months' salary.
- **New Jersey:** Suspends pension payments to those who earn more than \$15,000 a year.
- **Indiana:** Retirees hired back under the age eligible for Social Security have incomes limited to \$25,000 a year.

Source: Free Press research

More pension investigating

- A Free Press investigation in 2004 uncovered unusually large pensions for public employees in metro Detroit cities and Wayne County, particularly police and firefighter pensions. See the stories at www.freep.com.

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